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5-13-2013

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Citation Information

Olson, Ted. 2013. Book Review of Caleb Beissert: Federico Garcia Lorca & Pablo Neruda: Beautiful, Translations from the Spanish. *Smoky Mountain News*. Vol.14(41). 25. <http://www.smokymountainnews.com/archives/item/9975-lorca-neruda-and-the-beautiful-game>

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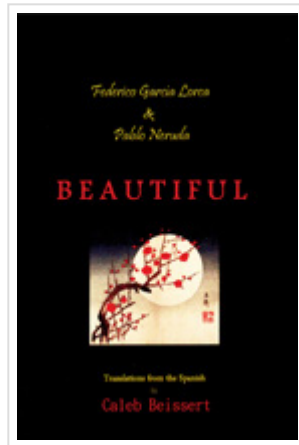
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Lorca, Neruda and the beautiful game

Written by Admin



By Ted Olson • Contributing writer

New Native Press, a small independent book publisher based in Tuckasegee in Jackson County, recently issued a book offering new translations of poems composed by the internationally recognized Spanish-language poets Federico Garcia Lorca and Pablo Neruda. Both of those poets have long been familiar figures to serious fans of poetry, with all of Lorca's and most of Neruda's work translated into English during the past half-century by various translators.

That being said, this new book — featuring 18 Lorca poems and 26 Neruda poems translated by Asheville-based poet Caleb Beissert — is welcome because it possesses an admirable unity of theme and mood, and that unity is reflected in the book's title, which is *Beautiful*.

Indeed, the Lorca and Neruda poems selected for translation by Beissert — and the resulting translations of those poems — are all, in one way or another, beautiful. The book does not employ that sadly overused

word superficially or sentimentally; rather, Beissert is interested in better understanding the true nature of beauty, and this quest constitutes the book's underlying motivation — to understand and celebrate the beautiful game of poetry as practiced by two masters whose works took shape within the Spanish language yet which have universal meaning.

Beissert's book, though somewhat slim at 80 pages, has large, noble intentions, which is forecast in the book's profound epigraph from Albert Camus: "Beauty is unbearable, drives us to despair, offering us for a minute the glimpse of an eternity that we should stretch out over the whole of time."

Even though they grew up in disparate sections of the Spanish-speaking world (Lorca in Spain, Neruda in Chile) and though their poetry was markedly different (as Beissert explains in his introduction), the two poets knew one another and were near contemporaries (Neruda, of course, lived 35 years longer, given the execution of Lorca by Francisco Franco's army during the Spanish Civil War); both poets in their poetry celebrated their nation (Lorca in fact spoke primarily for a region in Spain, Andalucia) and both were heavily influenced by literary modernism. Beissert succeeds in this grafting of two separate canons because he understands these poets, their worldviews, and their stylistic intentions.

The 44 original poems by Lorca and Neruda included in *Beautiful* (some of the poems being well known in the U.S. through previous translations by various translators, other poems being overlooked gems from those poets' canons) bear the extraordinary philosophical heft and stylistic grace long associated with these two poets. Generally speaking, Beissert's translations embody the spirit of the original poems without being bound by the constraints of literal translation. (Potential readers should note that, while the book does not provide the Spanish-language texts of the 44 poems, Beissert's translations are faithful to the originals.)

Beautiful includes a lucid, reflective introductory essay in which Beissert conveys his thoughts about the process and practice of translating poems. Longtime readers of modern world poetry who discover this book will already know something about Lorca and Neruda, yet those relatively unfamiliar with the two poets might yearn for more biographical information and historical context than is provided therein. Both poets led fascinating lives, and yet the book does not direct people excited by these poems to other informational sources offering additional perspectives about the poets (it wouldn't have detracted from its aesthetic integrity, for example, had the book included a short bibliography mentioning, for instance, such publications as Ian Gibson's acclaimed biography of Lorca and Adam Feinstein's useful biography of Neruda).

Yet, by showcasing resonant images of oriental visual art on its front and back covers, *Beautiful* takes a different stance: it is a book less interested in exploring Lorca and Neruda as Spanish-language poets who worked in specific cultural contexts than it is interested in appreciating Lorca and Neruda as individual poets who were infinitely complex as singular visionaries.

And what of the translations? Beissert captures their mystery (Lorca's poems, particularly), their majesty (Neruda's, especially), and their grace (found in the work of both poets, certainly). As an example, here is Beissert's evocative rendering of Lorca's poem "The Six Strings" ("Las seis cuerdas"):

The guitar

cries out to dreams.

The sobs of the lost

escape from its round

mouth.

And like a tarantula

it weaves a great star

to catch sighs,

floating in their black

cistern of wood.

Is there a better poem anywhere that evokes the magical and metaphorical powers of the guitar? Well, I know of a poem that at least equals "Las seis cuerdas" in paying homage to the instrument that Beethoven referred to as "an orchestra unto itself:" a poem entitled "La guitarra," also by Lorca. I hope someday to read an English-language rendering of that poem in some future collection showcasing more of Beissert's sensitive, memorable translations.

(Ted Olson is a professor of English and Appalachian Studies at East Tennessee State University in Johnson City, Tenn. He is editor of the recent Collected Short Stories of James Still and his own book of poems Revelations, which he will be discussing and signing at Malaprops Bookstore in Asheville on Sunday, May 5. He can be reached at This email address is being protected from spambots. You need JavaScript enabled to view it.. ">olson@etsu.edu.)